

Exhausted Couples. Changes in the Gender Order and Crisis of Care

Tomke König

In this article I will focus on a topic that has been discussed in feminist theory and women's and gender studies for many decades: the gendered division of labor as a centerpiece of the symbolic gender order of bourgeois-capitalist society. I want to focus on the shifting, especially at a more micro level, between different kinds of work done in the private and the public sphere. As you know, the assignment of women and men to these spheres and women's sole responsibility for housework and care has been considered problematic. Regina Becker-Schmidt, a famous German gender researcher, writes:

It's a dilemma: No matter what women choose – to have a family instead of career, career instead of family, or to have both – no matter what they choose, they lose. Trying to combine both work and family means stress; there is hardly any time for their own needs and it wears on their vitality (Becker-Schmidt 2008, 67, own translation).

Becker-Schmidt, like many feminist scientists, criticizes how women have to pay a high price for being included in the labor market and for the recognition and independence that is associated with this inclusion. With their care work, women ensure that men can rest and regenerate from labor. But women themselves have only little time for regeneration. That's why the double burden can only lead to the exhaustion of women. From this point of view, the shift between the different kinds of work causes as many problems as it satisfies needs.

Whether this also applies to men who participate in domestic work does not emerge from the remarks of Becker-Schmidt, which is why I pick up at this point. I would like to show that the current situation is not only worsening for women because they have to reconcile work and family life under even less favorable conditions; the question can also be posed as to how the double burden is also affecting men. One could therefore speak of a double double burden. In addition to the question of gender equality, there is another burning question regarding the everyday life of couples – namely, when and with whose help one can recover from the efforts of all the work involved. This is the background of my lecture today: couples are exhausted. I will focus on class-specific differences in the processes in which couples become exhausted – how it comes about depending on what resources are available to them. This is where the macro perspective comes in.

I would like to make a marginal note beforehand about why I am focusing on exhaustion. The fact that I came across this phenomenon is not only the result of many years of research on the gender arrangements of couples, but also owed to my own experience. I have been commuting between the

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city where I live with my family and the city where my job is located since my appointment as a professor. I find this stressful and often exhausting. It is ambivalent to talk about this experience publicly because it is a high-level complaint. After all, I have a permanent job, two great kids and a husband who takes responsibility for our kids and the household – otherwise I couldn't be here now. But maybe you know this from your own experience as academics: What one feels and experiences in one's own body almost involuntarily slides into the focus of attention. And once it is there, we ask, hear, and see more and more things and aspects that belong to this area. The difficult task then is to not generalize one's own point of view in research, but rather to find out what is symptomatic or typical in one's own experience. I hope that I succeed in the following.

The material I will be referring to is from my study "Familie heißt Arbeit teilen. Transformationen der symbolischen Geschlechterordnung" (2012). In this study, I interviewed couples of different social classes who live together with children under the age of 10 (a total of 25 couples). The stories told in the interviews are about processes of becoming a couple, moving into a shared household, the division of housework, discussions about having children, and, after becoming a family, about who will take over what kind of work (wage labor, housework, and care).

In the lecture I focus on the following question: If the ideals of the gendered division of labor are changing, what is happening to the main functions of domestic work? My presentation is based on three historically dominant ideals that currently regulate the practice of the division of labor: I start with the 1970s, when the ideal of the "good housewife" (gute Hausfrau) dominated. I then continue with an ideal of the 1990s: the "just division of labor" (gerechte Arbeitsteilung). Third, I present the current ideal of "flexible labor" (flexible Arbeitskraft). I will reconstruct these ideals one after another on the basis of three sociological discourses on housework. By referring back to my interviews, I'll describe what role the particular ideal currently plays in the everyday life of couples.

1. The ideal of the "good housewife" in the debate of the 1970s

Today, sociologists understand activities that are done in the private sphere as a form of work that everyone can do, which is different from how they conceived of things a few decades ago. In the 1970s, they assumed that women were predestined for these activities, that they had a disposition for doing so, and that they did so out of love. This naturalization of the gendered division of labor was first questioned in the German-speaking world in the so-called housework debate (Hausarbeitsdebatte). Perhaps some of you have heard of Maria Mies and her concept of "Hausfrauisierung", housewifization. In the following, I will be referring to the study by Kontos/Walser "... because the things that bring in money are the only ones that count" (1979).

The feminist sociologists have shown that it is constitutive for bourgeois-capitalist society to separate wage labor and reproductive labor and to assign this work to the sexes. This assignment was legitimated by the assumption that "men" and "women" are categorically different beings, and as such, perform different forms of work. According to this logic, women are caring, emotional, and are therefore responsible for the household and children. Men are rational, driven by interests, and are

therefore responsible for wage labor. This assignment of the spheres is the centerpiece of the symbolic gender order of bourgeois-capitalist society.

The gendered division of labor goes far beyond the capitalist mode of production. But it has proven to be particularly useful for this social formation. As Nancy Fraser puts it: “The capitalist economy relies on activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds” (2016). Although there are activities in the household that you can pay to have done (like cleaning, washing clothes, preparing food, etc.), the non-waged care activities that are tied up with emotions and to the special relationships between family members are necessary to the reproduction of labor. The central importance that housework has for the bourgeois-capitalist society does not go hand in hand with its social recognition. In fact, the opposite is the case. With the separation of productive and reproductive work, housework becomes devalued as “mere” reproduction. And the invisibility becomes one of its central structural features.

In group discussions with housewives, Kontos/Walser (1979) showed how much these women depend on family members for having their work recognized. And even this recognition is difficult to get, because the work of women is just not supposed to be visible. The more women succeed in making their work invisible and done out of love, the more they embrace the ideal of the “good housewife” (and good mother) who lovingly cares for their family. In the group discussions one can see how the ideal of the “good housewife” regulates women’s practices. For example, one woman says, “You definitely have to make sure that when your husband comes home, the duster is already put away.” “It’s a real run around,” says another woman, describing how she is constantly looking at her watch trying to get everything done by the time her husband comes home. On top of this, it shouldn’t even be visible that she ever even worked. One man complains that the ironing board is still standing in the living room when he comes home.

2. Everyday life today: The non-competent housewife and the double-burdened breadwinner

Statistical indicators show that there are still many more women than men who interrupt their wage labor to start a family. And thus, they might take up these traditional positions of housewife and breadwinner, at least for a period of time. Also in my material you can find such couples across all social milieus. This fact is generally understood to be an indication of a persistence of the gendered division of labor or gender relations. But if you look more closely at what happens when women and men live by this old model today, a change is apparent. The most striking finding of my material is that these women no longer succeed in fulfilling the ideal of the “good housewife”.

One woman who had been working for a long time gave up her career when starting her family. This was no question for her; she thought that she, as a woman, would really fall into her role as housewife:

But I had to realize that it’s a very time-consuming job, to be both mother and housekeeper – and I had to realize that that’s just not me. I mean, I’m sure I’m a loving, caring mother and I would like to have a nice household, but I just can’t get it all together.

This woman and other interviewees are often amazed to find that doing housework requires skills they simply do not have. This has certainly been noticed by women in earlier times. What seems new to me, however, is the conclusion that these women are drawing: they no longer want to do the housework alone, and they urge their husbands to get involved. As a result, all male breadwinners in my sample have taken over part of the home and caring work. The husband of the quoted housewife says:

I am pragmatic. When I get up, I go turn on the coffee machine or something like that, and then on the way to the bathroom, I notice that oh, the toilet needs cleaning. One thing just leads to the next: coffee, toilet, bathroom, and then I am done and leave the house.

This involvement relieves his wife. At the same time, however, his statement also implies that doing housework is easy; it's just a matter of wanting to do it. The woman feels misunderstood. Her husband does not see that it makes a difference as to whether he does these things on the way to work or whether she is left to take care of these many different tasks and the children alone all day. They fight about this, especially because the husband wants to rest after work. He knows that his wife has a busy day behind her. Nevertheless, he is not always ready to, and I quote, "get working again when I am done for the day." The interviewed woman doesn't find this supposedly "good argument" convincing. Their dispute doesn't end.

In my material, this man is not an isolated case. Quite impressively, most of the breadwinners in my sample report on what it feels like to do household chores and play with the children after work. Often the burning question of who can regenerate when and how and with whose help in daily life leads to arguing between the couple. This means that the old "Housewife – Breadwinner" model still persists. But if women are no longer willing to do the housework in secret and alone, this model will not work properly anymore. The break with the ideal of the "good housewife" has an important impact on a structural feature of housework: *it becomes visible*. And *one of the central functions of housework, the reproduction of labor, is put into question*. Everybody, both the breadwinners and the housewives want to have some time off where they don't have to work, and all of these couples are arguing about *when* do to this work. This is also expressed by the housewives in their desire to have time away from the children.

With this change in the structural features and functions of housework and the practices of division of labor, another ideal plays an important role. The same woman who stops working after giving birth to her child says, "I thought two people were having a child, so now things are fifty-fifty." Following the state of the art, this ideal became dominant in the 1990s.

3. The ideal of the "just division of labor" in the 1990s

In what follows, I will be referring to the study by Koppetsch/Burkhart "*The Illusion of Emancipation*" (1999). This and many other studies of family division of labor in the 1990s found that couples across all social milieus spoke of equal or equitable work sharing. What the women and men really meant by this was not investigated. Koppetsch/Burkart assumed that these couples thought that it could only be a fair division of labor if both worked for exactly the same amount of time. Measured by the

amount of housework done, most of the arrangements studied proved to be traditional. In the 1990s, most of the housework was still done by women. The men helped if necessary. And even then, it required guidance and pressure from women. The activities men took over were also gendered: men carry the heavy stuff and do the heavy-duty cleaning. By doing “domestic demonstrations of heroism” – ironing marathons, going to the store to do the weekly shopping or doing the work that nobody wants to do, like fixing the toilet, for example, they are able to demonstrate both their superior competence and their irreplaceability. In summary, Koppetsch/Burkart did not find that the couples renounced a “symbolic marking of gender differences for these domestic activities” (ibid.: 210). But Koppetsch/Burkhart also described a significant change: While the division of labor used to be conventionally prescribed, this came at the end of the 1990s with the feeling of free choice. The couples emphasize that this is the way they want it, not some other way. Thereby, *inequalities between men and women become increasingly invisible*. This is also helped by the fact that couples describe their partnership as an equal one, even though they still divide the work by gender. One central thesis of Koppetsch/Burkart is that women and men are mistaken about their own actions. Therefore, these sociologists spoke of an illusion of emancipation.

4. Couples for whom “it was always clear” that they share the work

The ideal of a “fair division of labor” can also be found in my material. But in the statements of the interviewed couples, the focus is not on the respective quantitative workload of housework. From the point of view of couples, it is more important that *both parties* assume responsibility for reproductive activities and that both have the *opportunity to exercise all forms of work*. For example, a breadwinner says that it does not meet his ideal to work full time 100%. He wants to spend more time with his children and “really enjoy each other as a family”. His ideal is that they are both employed at 50%, half-time.

There are good and bad conditions for realizing an arrangement in which both take responsibility for all forms of work. If both are professionally established at the time of starting a family, have flexible working hours, and do not have to work constantly at 150%, it is possible to get closer to reaching this ideal. An independent graphic designer whose husband is also a freelance graphic designer says:

We never had to set rules. It just has to do with the commitment you have. If one has a lot of work, the other automatically does more in the household. One cooks on Tuesday, the other on Friday. Sometimes the one who is hungry, sometimes the one who is more merciful.

The feeling of a “balanced state,” as this woman calls it, is less due to an exact calculation of the number of hours worked. Instead, the deciding factor is rather whether both partners constantly take care of the household and the children. As long as both take over work without being asked by the other and act according to the needs of each situation, the couple does not add up and compare the hours worked. The central point is: Both feel responsible for the household and the child and, in their own actions, take into consideration what is going on in the other’s life at the moment, what they can manage and might like to do, acknowledging how the other is currently preoccupied. In such an arrangement, the regulative ideal of the “good housewife” no longer makes sense. In the

1970s, it was a matter of course that a man would get angry when the ironing board was left out in the living room in the evening. Today, this board is rather a memorial. It shows that somebody did the housework and reminds the other that it is his or her turn now.

However, when two people are responsible for the same work, the notions about how to do it double. The everyday life of these couples includes conflicts about, for example, what should be ironed – when and how often should be cleaned and cleaned up – what food should be purchased where, etc. In all these conflicts, the couples experience that the ideal of a “fair division of labor” is unattainable – and they are not mistaken about it. This was claimed by other sociologists, like Koppetsch/Burkhart. The above mentioned graphic designer says: “Sometimes you feel like you’re secretly doing a lot and there’s always still more left to do, but both have that feeling.” What gets to them is the total amount of their respective work. It’s so big that it’s easy to get the impression that you’re doing more than the other.

For most of these couples, it therefore makes sense to transfer housework and care to others – typically, these others are female migrant workers who go from poor countries to rich countries. It is these other women who enable the couples to realize a fair division of labor. This is the reason why gender researchers are rightly critical of treating the commodification of social reproduction as a solution to the contradiction of productive and reproductive work. The commodification contributes to the reproduction of the old gender order at a different level. Against this background, one of the results of my study is particularly interesting: even for couples where both partners take over all forms of work, thereby redistributing housework, the burden on the individual person nevertheless remains. And this is true even if a large part of the housework is transferred to service providers. The central point is that in these arrangements, no one can put their feet up, rest, and regenerate after they get off work. Because it is both partners who now experience the structural contradictions associated with a shift between the different working forms and spheres, I speak of exhausted couples. This exhaustion, in turn, is closely related to two things: for one, the demands of caring increase. Second – and this is the key point – working women and men in the sphere of employment will continue to be confronted with the kinds of demands that require a gendered division of labor.

Focusing only on this double burden of these women and men, however, overlooks another important point: it is precisely because these women and men are not exclusively responsible for home and care work that they can have a genuine interest in these activities. The partner of the woman quoted above, for example, says ironing is an activity that would allow him to distance himself from his wage labor. He could relax well. While it is difficult or even impossible for the “good housewife” to distance herself from her work, housework here is a means of *distancing himself from wage labor*. So another structural feature of housework is *changing*. That means: If everyone does everything, the change between different activities can also be experienced positively. Following Marx, one could say that *such a change is the central condition of the possibility of not being alienated from work* (nicht entfremdete Arbeit). The latter is characterized by the fact that each one can do different things according to his or her abilities and needs (Gothaer program); their role is not set or determined. Using an example from Marx, he describes how when:

society regulates the general production, (it) makes it possible to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner,

just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic (The German Ideology 1845).

I like the implicit criticism Marx offers regarding the processes in which subjects are disciplined and normalized. Marx uses only male examples or speaks of men who secure the means of life with their activities (hunter, fisher, herdsman) and he does not talk about the division of labor between men and women at this point. But his basic idea can be transferred to the gendered division of labor. Here, too, social activities are fixed. Housework and the care of children are assigned to women, while wage labor is assigned to men. These assignments also define the position in which the different jobs are best performed: housework is best done by the non-employed housewives. Waged labor is best done by the men who don't have to take care of the reproductive work. One social utopia could be a kind of labor division that no longer reproduces the binary logic (private equal to feminine, occupation equal to male). It would therefore be possible, regardless of gender, to work in the morning, to spend time with the children in the afternoons, to take care of the household in the evening, and to be intellectually or politically active after dinner at will.

5. The ideal of “flexible labor” and the crisis of reproductive work

So far, I have described what happens to housework when women and men question the gender assignment of different forms of work. I focused on what women and men want or no longer want. This perspective must now be supplemented by an important dimension – namely structural constraints. What happens when women have to earn money because their partner's income is insufficient? And what happens when a couple has to change positions because the man is unemployed for a long time?

These questions lead us to a current debate revolving around the keyword “crisis of care”. At the heart of this feminist discourse are economic changes that undermine the conditions of the gendered division of labor. First and foremost, they mention the end of the so-called normal employment relationship (Normalarbeitsverhältnisses), which is characterized by life-long employment and wages that can cover the needs of a family. Women increasingly have to provide for the maintenance of the family, because a single income (due to the precarization of work) is no longer sufficient. However, it is also significant that neoliberal policies target everyone's employment – regardless of gender and family status. Life is job-centered for all, regardless of gender.

At different hierarchical levels, employees spend more and more time at their workplace for different reasons (Hochschild 2002). But in general, working hours are increasingly determining the time had with the family and how that time is spent. Women and men have to be mobile and flexible workers. Everyone is supposed to take responsibility for their own professional and private lives. If one follows the various studies on this topic, however, one sees that women fulfill this ideal particularly well. In wage labor they accept difficult working conditions without adequate financial compensation. They are prepared to organize family life under constant lack of time and often with scarce material resources. Thus, the women compensate for the gaps created by their readiness to work in both spheres.

The moment of crisis can be seen in this very constellation: the conditions of the possibility of a gendered division of labor are no longer given, but it is still expected that it will be realized. From this point of view, women are the victims of the neoliberal change in working conditions. They are exposed to an additional increased burden. In this respect, the reproductive crisis is understood to be a crisis of women. Another reading of the crisis emerges when we look at the situation from the perspective of gender arrangements in the private life. Then, it is the reproduction of labor rather than the situation of women that can be described as crisis-ridden. My material shows that this crisis is *triggered by a change in the gender order*. Because social actors no longer take reproductive work to be the sole responsibility of women, for everyone, the question increasingly arises as to when and how to recover from their work and with whose help. In this sense, everybody is affected by the crisis.

6. An unemployed man who does not want to do the housework

The couple is in their mid-thirties. He is a trained cook and has been unemployed for several years. She is a trained hairdresser and earns the household income in a cleaning company. She leaves the house very early and does a hard physical job. Therefore, she expects her partner to handle the household during the day. For him, this is initially plausible. But the longer he is unemployed, the harder it is for him. He says: "But to be honest, I've had it up to here. Cleaning, picking things up; it's the same every day. Because I have no job." It is quite possible for this man to do housework. However, for him, being exclusively responsible for the household is problematic. This constant, repetitive, and never-ending work is only tolerable for him in the long run if he is also engaged in wage labor. So when his wife comes home in the evening, the apartment is messy, the bathroom is dirty, and in the kitchen dishes are stacking up. They fight about it almost every day.

The man suffers from the fact that his wife has to go to the limits of her physical capacity, working as a cleaning woman to secure their common livelihood. He says, "I wish she could stay at home, relax, and regain her strength." He cannot take care of his wife's regeneration as a stay-at-home husband. He could only imagine it to be possible if he were the breadwinner. The refusal to go into the position of the "good housewife" has a consequence, especially for the working partner: she cannot recover from work.

7. Conclusion

The focus was on different ideals of gendered division of labor. I've tried to show how couples of different social milieus become exhausted.

- Housewives do not want to do the work in the family either invisibly or alone and that is why the breadwinner is also double burdened.
- One might think that couples who transfer care work to other women are less exhausted. But in these couples, too, the question arises as to who can regenerate when from work.

- Finally, there are men who, due to unemployment, are placed in a position that women have been fighting against for many decades. So it is not surprising that these men are not “good housewives” and are not taking care of the reproduction of woman worker.

In the sense of the capitalistic logic, it is of benefit when women *and* men can be exploited twice. It is in line with neoliberal policies that seek to dismantle the welfare state when employees take responsibility for each other and do everything to ensure that they can both be gainfully employed. However, in this (macro-sociological) perspective, a whole series of experiences of the social actors are obscured, ones that have become visible in my microanalysis – experiences that are not at all in line with a work-centered society.

If you ask women and men who are participating in all forms of work, you can observe that the meaning of wage labor has been relativized. In these constellations, wage labor also loses its unique meaning for many men as a field of self-realization and recognition. In this respect, the meaning that it has for a woman or a man to do some cleaning after work, to play with the children, or to cook is not completely covered by the term “double burden”. Housework and childcare are experienced as satisfying, especially if someone doesn’t have to exclusively deal with these activities or if there is sufficient time aside from wage labor to do them. The latter cannot be stressed enough. The model “Everyone does everything” really only becomes liveable when the pressure – be it financial or temporal – is mitigated: when achieving a living wage is not a constant struggle or cause for concern and when the time resources are sufficient that not every act is subject to efficiency improvement. Many of the interviewed women and men formulate a genuine interest in doing housework and caring for the children when the conditions are good.

In addition, some structural features of reproductive work change in these arrangements. If this is not done as an exclusive activity within a binary structured gender order, it is no longer invisible – but that is a constitutive feature of non-waged social-reproductive labor in capitalist societies. In addition, the partners pay each other considerably more recognition for the individual household activities. And housework is no longer associated with material dependence on the partner in these arrangements.

So far, the dissolution of the boundaries between work and family has been presented as only problematic. Key words are: instrumentalization and rationalization of the entire life, where there is little room for maneuvering against the power of economic demands. I want to contribute a further reading of this delimitation of wage labor. The forms of the division of labor in the private sphere that do not assign wage labor and housework to gender, and thus no longer clearly reproduce the binary logic of the symbolic gender order, set into motion the “separation of kitchen and state” constitutive of bourgeois-capitalist societies (Haug 2010: 149).

Women and men succeed in overcoming the gendered binary logic, but socially, this is still largely utopian. At the structural level, this development is only possible if all forms of work are given the same weight, seen as necessary and in principle equivalent – from caring, social, political, and cultural work to living wage labor. For this purpose, social-reproductive work in the private and in public would have to be systematically upgraded. A step in that direction would be to better pay for services and careers in education, health, social services, and care. If the various kinds of work were

to be weighted equally, and if the binary logic of sphere separation were really abolished, this would be both an expression of and an engine of possible radical change.

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Prof. Dr. Tomke König

Professorin für Geschlechtersoziologie

Fakultät für Soziologie

Universität Bielefeld

tomke.koenig@uni-bielefeld.de